

Nicole T. Castro, "Review of 'Death beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference' by Grace Kyungwon Hong (University of Minnesota Press, 2015)," *Lateral* 7.2 (2018).

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Book Reviews

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Review of *Death beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference* by Grace Kyungwon Hong (University of Minnesota Press)

Nicole T Castro

ABSTRACT As social issue fatigue threatens to isolate even the most robust justice scholars and activists, Hong asks us to hold our contemporary complexities in unresolved tension. She invites us back to the table, asking us to attend to how our lives and others' deaths are related and to how neoliberalism works to redefine, and obfuscate, these connections. To understand how racialized, sexualized, and gendered differences are produced, Hong argues that exploring death, as well as the work of neoliberal technologies to erase marginalized memories of death, reveals the uneven distribution of precarity and violence. The book will benefit any seminar or study that seeks to parse the tangled complexity of contemporary oppressions in and through U.S. American political structures, as well as any who seek an exemplar of how to do so with academic rigor, exceptional feminist citation practices, and ethical elegance.

Death beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference. By Grace Kyungwon Hong. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. Pp. 200. (paper) ISBN 978 1 4384 6967 6. US List \$25.00

As social issue fatigue threatens to isolate even the most robust justice scholars and activists, Grace Kyungwon Hong asks us to hold our contemporary complexities in unresolved tension. She invites us back to the table, asking us to attend to how our lives and others' deaths are related and to how neoliberalism works to redefine and obfuscate these connections. To understand how racialized, sexualized, and gendered differences are produced, Hong argues that exploring death, as well as the work of neoliberal technologies to erase marginalized memories of death, reveals the uneven distribution of precarity and violence.

Hong posits *difference* and *impossibility* as analytic tools to navigate the intricate ways that neoliberal efforts, claiming to protect marginalized lives, are instead exacerbating their deaths. These two tools avoid replicating the violences of glossing, generalizing, or erasing "those whose lives are unprotectable, whose social and political statuses are so negligible that they do not merit recognition or protection" (12). She defines her concepts with great specificity, re-contextualizing and extending her terms across each chapter's analysis. These tools act as political strategy against neoliberal powers. Hong's *difference*, inspired from Audre Lorde's philosophy, is "a cultural and epistemological practice that holds in suspension (without requiring resolution) contradictory, mutually exclusive, and negating impulses" (7). The *impossible* is an interrogative gift of alternative worlds and undreamt possibilities, born of irreconcilable tensions; it is the act of "posing a question that can never be answered, but that must be continually addressed, enacting a temporality of suspension rather than a resolution" (15). Neoliberalism is an "epistemological structure of disavowal" that "affirms certain modes of racialized,

gendered, and sexualized life” in order to “disavow its exacerbated production of premature death” (7). For her analyses, Hong builds on Agamben’s notion of bare life and Foucault’s theories of biopolitics, showing how neoliberalism spans two co-existing forms of socially sanctioned death: a “new form of (bio)power that ‘lets die,’ and outright deadly, necropolitical regimes that ‘make die” (13).

Hong curates a masterful series of analyses to explore difference, pulling exemplars and wisdom from literature, ghosts, queer reproductive experiences, jazz, and even the academy. The introduction sings, introducing “legacy” and “Blackness-as-multiple” through Lorde’s relationship to Malcolm X’s voice. Chapter 1 follows difference through a genealogy of Chicana feminist movements as Hong explores how Oscar Zeta Acosta’s and Ana Castillo’s literary works invoke irony and humor to mourn Chicana/o death. In Chapter 2, Hong analyzes how Lorde and Cherríe Moraga trouble moralism to disrupt respectability and legibility in their own embrace of the erotic, shame, and inadequacy. Continued in Chapter 3, Hong ties reproductive respectability’s connections to both slavery and queer possibilities and futurities, emphasizing what jazz improvisation teaches us about the impossibility of each. Chapter 4 takes queer theories of reproduction to school, revealing new paths for Black feminists faced with the material and epistemological violences of “excellency” that render the university a biopolitical institution.

Hong grounds each analysis in queer and women of color feminisms, a scholarly tradition committed to activism, theory, and cultural practices. She practices what she provokes—a thoughtful, unwavering attention to complexities and contributions, guided by Lorde’s question, “in what way do I contribute to the subjugation of any part of those who I call my people?” (63). In doing so, Hong creates space between life and death and the tensions of each, inviting us in to witness the (im)possibilities of breaking this binary as well as how useful the binary is to neoliberal powers, affects, and politics. In its lack of prescriptive impulse, each analysis is inclusive to readers who study other representations or manifestations of violence. Hong argues the epistemological importance of refusing to predict or prescribe, as hers is a “project of pursuing a complex liberation without any guarantee of a certain or knowable future” (34). Any reader discomfort from this is a success of the book.

In questioning the ubiquity of death, Hong’s analyses are bountifully creative, speaking new futures into being and detailing obstacles to the task. Although Hong does not explicitly tie her research to afrofuturist work, her robust Black feminist orientation imbues such a connection. Exploring legacy and new futures, she pursues “the only way to be able to break out of the already-colonized definitions of what we can and want and do, and of how to live” (80). Science fiction and other forms of afrofuturism would be at home among her examples, serving a second amplification purpose as she clearly connects obstructed world-making to more “canonical” works of Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault.

Hong lyrically draws us between the “immensely systemic and immediately interpersonal,” or the macro of the contemporary oppressive moment and the micro of how it is built between us (147). *Affect*, Hong argues, is that which contributes to the subjugation of our peoples, modalities that mobilize “terror and loathing against those populations in order to legitimate their disposability” (76) and, inversely, are used to justify our own secure positions. Hong ultimately asserts that “it is not fear and loathing in and of themselves that are the problem, but the harnessing of fear and loathing to structures of abandonment” (78–79). She asks us to suspend and dismantle the series of coerced, legislated impulses that lead us to disavow and abandon each other, impulses that are often turned into reactions before we consciously register them. This is another

place to bridge academic research and activist practices; mindfulness and embodiment work extends widely, focusing on play, movement, and performance-as-resistance, as well as oral histories, alternative space creation, and nonviolent communication, to name only a few. Readers interested in mindfulness will find abundant, if unnamed, intersections.

Hong acts as fear-full and fear-less leader, and deserves the same accolade she gives Lorde and Moraga: “creating a politics out of the most precarious and indefensible aspects of herself” (81), as she engages the same (im)possibilities to which she invites us. This concise, 150-page read is a compelling contribution to each of the many academic and activist conversations it touches. The book will benefit any seminar or study that seeks to parse the tangled complexity of contemporary oppressions in and through US American political structures, as well as any who seek an exemplar of how to do so with academic rigor, exceptional feminist citation practices, and ethical elegance.

 [Bio](#)



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Nicole T. Castro, MA, (she/her) is a Buddhist, scholar, biracial woman of color. In research and life, she brings a lens of embodiment and mindfulness to study violence. She asks who gets to define violence and is curious how certain co-created spaces can invite and encourage people to practice new, non-violent forms of communicating. Adjacent research interests include: intrapersonal communication and embodied knowledges; how queer, nondyadic relationships disrupt problematic heteronormativity; and the lack of language around consent, coercion, and sexual violence. Committed to making her work legible and helpful beyond the academy, Nicole serves in multiple community organizations and tries her best to meditate on a regular basis. She fosters kittens, plays Dungeons & Dragons, and can happily eat oven pizza multiple days a week.



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